

Jacques Maritain's Vision of Judaism and Anti-Semitism

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I started reading Maritain in Argentina while I was still in high school. We lived under a dictatorship where freedom was a luxury enjoyed by neither students nor citizens. Reading, especially in foreign languages, was what we used to call a “little window” to the world. It allowed us to escape censorship and enlarge our views. French philosophers in particular influenced my generation and gave special meaning to our search. We were looking for a spiritual and religious commitment that made sense for our historical situation. Maritain, among others, gave us that opportunity. A professor of philosophy acquainted us with his thought, and from that moment on, several students and I started exchanging books by and on Maritain that we got from Catholic or French bookstores.

Rereading Maritain has reminded me of those days. In the present religious exploration for a philosophy of personalism and society, I still consider some of his books on the meaning of the person (*The Person and the Common Good: Towards a Philosophy of the Human Person* and *The Rights of Man and Natural Law*) as helpful guides. Maritain, as any Christian thinker committed and interested in his faith must, devoted part of his philosophical work to analyzing Judaism and the role of the Jewish people. The results of these labors are reflected throughout his work, but particularly in a book republished in 1990, *Le Mystère d'Israël*, that contains most of his thought on the subject.¹

¹Jacques Maritain, *Le Mystère d'Israël et Autres Essais*. Nouvelle Édition Augmentée (Paris:

Maritain's reflections on Israel represent "a Christian perspective" that is "metaphysical and religious."² His interpretation is a Catholic examination that reflects in many ways tendencies that are difficult to accept or understand after Vatican Council II. This is evident in a 1939 text where he pointed out that:

If there are Jews among the readers of this essay, they will understand, I am sure, that as a Christian I try to understand something of the history of their people from a Christian viewpoint. They know that according to Saint Paul, we Gentile Christians have been grafted onto the predestined olive tree of Israel in place of the branches which did not recognize the Messiah foretold by the prophets. Thus we are converts to the God of Israel who is the true God, to the father whom Israel recognized, to the son whom it rejected. Christianity, then, is the overflowing fullness and the supernatural realization of Judaism.³

This is indeed triumphalism at its best!

There is a paradox in his approach. Maritain defended the Jew as a citizen, his rights and equality in society, and denounced anti-Semitism passionately. His theology, however, and especially his reading of Saint Paul, projected a sense of contempt for Judaism, for the Sinai God-Israel commitment and its development through the centuries. He fought for the civil rights of Jews, but denied meaning to Jews in their spirituality and covenantal vocation. In many respects, and I tremble in pointing this out, he was a metaphysical anti-Semite, as Martin Buber classified some Christian theologians in Germany before Nazism, especially Adolf Von Harnack.⁴

The Varieties of Mystery

Maritain defines Israel as a "mystery." He considers this mystery of the same order as the Mystery of the Word and the Mystery of

Desclée de Brouwer, 1990). See also my "Jacques Maritain y las Pautas del Dialogo," *Criterio*, no. 1743, Buenos Aires, 8 de julio de 1976.

²Jacques Maritain, *Ransoming the Time* (New York: Gordian, 1972), 141 and ff.

³Jacques Maritain, *A Christian Looks at the Jewish Question*, reprint edition (New York: Arno Press, 1973), 23–24.

⁴Paul Mendes Flohr, "Martin Buber and the Metaphysics of Contempt," in *Living With Anti-Semitism: Modern Jewish Responses*, ed. Jehuda Reinharz (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1987), 133–64.

the Church. Like them, “this mystery is in the very heart of redemption.” Maritain’s interpretation is understood in the definition given by J. Richter, “Mystery has an eschatological meaning and is related to historical events. . . . In the New Testament, the word ‘mystery’ signifies the design of God for realizing the salvation of humanity through Jesus Christ.”⁵

The existence of Israel from this perspective acquires a special sense. Israel constitutes a stage of a plan. It doesn’t possess its own way. Its mission is to prepare a road. For that reason, Maritain points out, “The mystical body of Israel is an unfaithful church and a repudiated church (and that is why Moses had figuratively given forth the *libellum repudii*)—repudiated as a church, not as a people. And ever awaited by the Bridegroom, who has never ceased to love her.”⁶

For Maritain, the synagogue, by denying and not accepting Jesus as the Messiah, Son of God, has chosen the world, the temporal dimension of history, losing the dimension of the supernatural order. The world acquires in Maritain’s thought a negative dimension. Judaism, however, perceives the universe as the creative possibility of humanity for implementing the religious and moral vocation of the Jewish people in covenantal commitment with God. It is not by chance, according to rabbinic thought, that the narration of creation precedes revelation, the call to Abraham. The world is a blessing, and not the place of seduction and materialism that seems to characterize Maritain’s critique.

Israel doesn’t envision itself as a mystery, or a church. Israel is a people, a community born out of God’s call, to be a *Goi Gadol* (Gen. 12), a community with a destiny, crowned by the Sinai experience, the alliance of God’s commands with his people. Israel considers itself a vocation of God’s testimony, fulfilling a call until the end of time, the Messianic days.

Israel is called by God and prepares its own way spiritually by reading and explaining the biblical commands. It is an expounding of

⁵J. Richter, *Conceptos Fundamentales de la Teologia* (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1987), vol. 3, 81. See also: Erik Peterson, *Il Mistero degli Ebrei e dei Gentili Nella Chiesa* (Milano: Edizioni di Comunita, 1960); M. T. Dubois, *Rencontres avec le Judaïsme en Israël* (Jerusalem: Éditions de L’Olivier, 1983), chap. 5, “Jacques Maritain et le Mystère D’Israël,” 129–46; ed. Adolf Darlap, *Sacramentum Mundi* (New York: Palm Publishers, 1969), vol. 4, 133–36; “Mystery” by Karl Rahner.

⁶Maritain, *Ransoming the Time*, 154; Maritain, *Le Mystère d’Israël*, 40; see also, F. Lovsky, *Antisémitisme et Mystère D’Israël*, (Paris: Editions Albin Michel, 1955), chapters 6, 7, and 11.

the Word by the rabbis, the oral teaching, the Mishnah and Talmud, enlarging the meanings of the word of God by the work of the commentaries from the first century to our days. The call and relationship with God is described as a relationship of partners, in the common task of redeeming the world and humanity. Commentary and interpretation are the tools to make meaningful God's word and its implementation in individual peoples' daily experience.

The spiritual richness of the rabbinic commentary was disregarded or was unknown to Maritain and other Christian thinkers whom Maritain mentions in his writings. To fathom the meaning of the rabbinic exposition of the biblical call, known as "the law" in Christian terms, is vital in order to understand the ongoing mission of Israel in God's design. The hermeneutics of interpretation and commentary is central in this process of actualizing God's call. Simon Rawidowicz, whose analysis would have changed Maritain's presentation of Israel's character and mission, explains this process:

In contradistinction to *explicatio* and *commentatio*, I would understand by *interpretatio*, with which I deal here, an attempt at reshaping either the "document" interpreted or the world it came from. Here an act of transference is always involved. An invasion of one system by another takes place. *Interpretatio* lives by crisis in various degrees. The crisis that stimulates it will become its criterion. *Interpretatio* can be characterized by a particular attitude of the *interpreter* who struggles between preserving and rejecting some forms or content of the world at his interpretive "mercy," by a tension between continuation and rebellion, tradition, and innovation. It derives its strength both from a deep attachment to the "text" and from an "alienation" from it, a certain distance, a gap which has to be bridged. *Interpretatio* is the "way out" when man is compelled to "take it" or "break it." Many a battle was fought and lost on the battlefield of *interpretatio*. And the battle goes on and will go on as long as *homo* is an *interpres*.

Explicatio and *commentatio* follow the "text" step by step, "uncover" and explain it from the aspect of its form and content, language, and historical background. *Interpretatio* is centered on the "soul" of the text, its leitmotif, its main purpose, its essence, its particular character. *Interpretatio* assumes that there is a hidden layer both in the form and the content of the document to be interpreted; this "hidden" needs uncovering. There is a mystery between the words and between the lines, that which the document ought to have said and did not say, either because it could not

say (for various reasons) or did not want to say—this it is which intrigues the *interpretator*, who will naturally dig in the hidden layers of the text. He wants to make the implicit in the text explicit, to spell out that which is implied.⁷

This methodology was followed by Jesus and his disciples. Its disregard by Christian theologians caused much harm to the people of Israel and to the interfaith relationship.

The Two Roads of God's Call

Rereading Maritain and his concept of law and grace reminds us of the need to reflect upon the two roads of God in the West: Sinai and Golgotha. This reflection is central in the new approach to understanding the other as a person of God, projecting a sense that goes beyond the interchange of cordialities. It is not a diplomatic recognition that might imply a certain syncretism. It is a *Heshbon Hanefesh*, the *Kenosis* of the Christian soul, a reckoning of the soul, to find a meaning for our different roads. The reckoning entails a study and reflection on the first century, both Rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity.

Maritain performed this reflection in his book, *The Living Thought of Saint Paul*, where he analyzes theological questions like law and grace, the economy of salvation, and the matter of the “New Man.” The first edition of the book in 1941 reflecting a tendency concerning the New Testament and the understanding of the Hebrew tradition that was negative towards the Jewish people and Judaism. In the introduction Maritain points out that,

Hence the great intuition which inflames Paul's mind is the feeling for the universality of the Kingdom of God, and the feeling of salvation by faith, not by Law. Another intuition, inseparably bound to the former, is that of the primacy of the internal over the external, of the spirit over the letter, of the life of grace over exterior observances. This is the very spirit of the Gospel. Paul understood more deeply than anyone else the immense spiritual revolution carried out by Jesus, and which Saint Thomas Aquinas illuminates when he shows that because the Old Law was a

⁷Simon Rawidowicz, *Studies in Jewish Thought* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1974), 49–50.

written law, what mattered most therein was the external fulfillment of the rites and prescriptions; but that the New Law is primarily and before all else an unwritten law—written by God in the hearts of those called to Him—and that what is primary therein, and “that in which consists all its power,” is the grace of the Holy Spirit operating in souls by means of faith and charity.⁸

What is this Law? Is it *Nomos* (law in Greek) or *Halakah* (in Hebrew, a way of being and doing religiously)?

Halakah is a noun derived from the verb *halah*, “to go.” *Halakah* is a way of implementing in private and community existence God’s covenant. To be halakic is to make God’s presence and moral command a reality in all aspects of life: at the moment of waking up in the morning, thanking God for restoring the soul; at meals, thanking God for the goodness of food; at prayer and at study, thanking God for God’s presence. *Halakah* is the joy of shaping life by the experience of covenant, and guided by tradition, a way of being with God, for God.

What is the halakic explanation or implementation? It is the Oral Torah that completes the Written Torah. One example illustrates its meaning. Exodus 20:8 reminds Israel to “remember the sabbath day and keep it holy.” There is a prohibition of work, but the biblical text, the Written Torah, does not engage in any specifics. It does not say if carrying a child—or walking, or feeding the hungry, or saving a fellow person—might be a transgression. The halakic interpretation will expound the meaning and practical implementation of the Exodus text in many of its vital aspects.

Maritain does not seem to understand that *Halakah* is not *Nomos*, law considered as an end by itself. Such a view of *halakah* recalls the antinomianism of many Christian thinkers. This tendency resulted in public confrontations, the disputations that obligated Jewish teachers to defend Judaism. Some medieval Jewish theological summas are the products of such discussions, organized by Christian ecclesiastical or secular powers. The *Sefer Ha-Ikkarim* (Book of Principles) of Joseph Albo (fifteenth century), for example, represents such a defense of Jewish faith. Albo took prominent part in the disputation at Tortosa (1413–14) where he explained the nature and aims of *Halakah*.

⁸Jacques Maritain, *The Living Thought of Saint Paul* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1941), 3.

Albo devotes a chapter responding to antinomianism and stressing the phenomenological value and meaning of biblical law and rabbinic interpretation. He describes law by stressing that,

Inasmuch as the divine law is a rule and a guide for the human race, emanating from God, it necessarily points to a bond and a union between God, who is the author of the commands, and man, who is the subject of them. Hence it is clear from this aspect that hearing a command from God necessarily proves that there is such a thing as prophetic inspiration, divine revelation, and that there is a God who is the author of the law and who exercises providence. This is especially true when one hears the first two commandments of the decalogue, for they denote essentially these three dogmas, as we explained before. Nevertheless God desired to let Israel hear from His mouth the ten commandments so as to indicate all those duties which a man becomes liable to by reason of this bond between God and him, both from the point of view of the master who is the author of the command, and from the point of view of the servant, who is the subject. For this reason they were expressed in two separate tables, to indicate that these two aspects are different from each other. Those five which have reference to God, the Master, are in one table, while the five which concern specially man, who is the servant, are in the other table, to show that both are necessary for the attainment of human perfection.⁹

Maritain followed Paul, who thought that law was calculated to multiply sin (Gal. 3:19 and Rom. 5:20) by its numerous precepts. The law, seen as *Nomos* (the Greek rendering), and not as *Halakah* (God's command to follow a way of implementing revelation), is considered as an imperfect tool superseded by faith. This idea is strongly supported by Paul, though it is not necessarily original with him. The Talmud, *Makkot 23b, 24a*, states that "six hundred and thirteen commandments were given to Moses . . . Then came Habakkuk and reduced them to one, as it is said, 'The just shall live by his faith.'" But rabbinic theology does not see a contrast between faith and law, considering faith (*Emunah*, Amen) as part of the Jewish process of implementing God's covenant in life. Kaufmann Kohler points out that "the difference between the Talmud and Paul here is, of course, quite a fundamental one: the Talmud means that the chief content

⁹Joseph Albo, *Sefer Ha-Ikkarim*. Book of Principles (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1930), vol. 3, 245–46.

of the law is faith, without abolishing thereby a single precept. It is very instructive to note how Paul adapts Pharisaic utterances to his own purposes."¹⁰

Maritain's Pauline critique of law shares some characteristics with other Christian thinkers who are not at all in theological harmony. Calvin, in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, commenting on Romans 10:5–8, points out that "righteousness which is given through the Gospel has been freed of all conditions of the law. . . . The Gospel promises are free and dependent solely upon God's mercy, while the promises of the law depend on works."¹¹ Law is criticized here as an end in itself, while Jews would experience and live *Halakah* as a means, a way to make actual God's covenant and command.

Maritain turns his attention to Paul's concept of justification:

And now all the moral precepts of the Law, far from being destroyed, are confirmed, because Faith makes it possible to fulfill them in a lasting and complete fashion, and because from thenceforth they represent only that behavior which is fitting to a being already made just and free of sin in his root powers, to the extent that he clings to Christ and receives his life from Him. The meaning of those precepts has thus been transfigured: They no longer command bad men to be good and to grow into something which they are not; rather do they command good men not to be bad, and not to fail in that which they already are, not to fall back into the state of slavery from whence they have been freed. Justification is received through faith, quite apart from works. But once justified, man is more than ever held to good works (be it only, as it was in the case of the good thief, as far as the disposition of the soul is concerned). And this is not because the works of man would have power to save man by themselves, but because good works proceed from the charity which has been given to man and which is his life—his new and eternal life—and which is joined to faith when faith is living: "faith working through charity" [Gal. 6]. And also because the works of charity, which is a fruitful and effective life, themselves are deserving of life, to the extent that man, acting freely under the inflowing of grace, receives from God's mercy the dignity of being a

¹⁰Kaufmann Kohler, "Antinomianism," *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York and London: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1906), vol. 1, 631.

¹¹Daniel P. Fuller, *Gospel and Law, Contrast or Continuum? The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1980), 65 ff.

cause—secondary and instrumental—in the matter of his salvation. “God is not unjust so as to forget your works . . .” [Hebr. 6:10]. “. . . The crown of righteousness which the Lord, the just judge, shall award to me on that day” [II Tim. 4:8].¹²

Justification thus establishes the church as a new entity, the renewed Israel, now qualitatively distinct from Jew and Greek alike, transcending racial and social barriers (Galatians 3:28). The sharp edge of this point, for Paul, was the conviction not only that pagan converts to Christianity did not need to become Jews in order fully to belong to God’s people, but also that the attempt to do so was in itself a renunciation of the Gospel, implying that Christ’s achievement was insufficient or even unnecessary (Galatians 2:21; 5:4–6). At the same time, Paul warns pagan converts against the opposite mistake, that of imagining Jews to be now cut off without hope, a warning that Christian theology has not always heeded, even in Paul himself (Rom. 11:13–24).

“Justification by faith” is thus a shorthand for “justification by grace through faith,” and, in Paul’s thought at least, has nothing to do with an attitude toward good behavior. On the contrary: Paul expects converts to live in the manner appropriate for members of the covenant (Rom. 6, etc.), and this is in fact necessary if faith is not to appear a sham (2 Corinthians 13:5). His polemic against “works of the law” is not directed against those who attempted to earn covenant membership through keeping the Jewish law, whereas God desires a world-wide family (Rom. 3:27–31; Gal. 3:15–22). The Noah story, Genesis 9, conveys a different idea: God is offering covenantal peace to humanity and when it fails, God chooses Abraham whose vocation is fulfilled by the *Halakah* commitment.

Grace and faith are not foreign to Jewish spirituality as Maritain seems to imply. Both concepts are present in the core of the biblical account and guide Jewish life. Grace is lovingkindness (Psalm 89:3), and according to rabbinic theology one of the three elements by which the world is sustained (*Mishnah Avot* 1:2). Grace and faith (*emunah* in Hebrew, an amen to God’s call) are part of the *imitatio dei* exercised by the *halakic* discipline.

¹²Maritain, *The Living Thought of Saint Paul*, 62.

Maritain's reference to the limitations and death of the law remind us of the teaching of contempt towards Jews and its consequences in the West, which denied Israel a place in God's design after Jesus:

The Law is holy because it is the created expression of the wisdom of God. But while the Law makes us know evil, it does not give us the strength to avoid evil. And by making evil known, the Law is, for evil [Rom. 2:3]. Thus the Law bears death with it. If there were no law, there would be no transgression, and hence there would be no death. This is true, in a sense, concerning the moral law generally; suppose the impossible, that such a law were not impressed in our hearts; then there could be no transgression and hence no punishment. But all this is especially true of the Law promulgated on Sinai, and it is to this Law that what Paul says applies directly and above all. The Mosaic Law casts upon the conscience, with divine authority, a light which we cannot put aside, much more piercing and more implacable than the natural light cast by our weak reason in its search after the natural law. And the requirements (of holiness) to which the Law subjects men are far more rigorous, and the end (salvation) toward which it tends much higher, than the natural happiness and the natural duties of which pagan sages had conceived an idea. Paul's line of reasoning supposes this fact, that the Jews are set apart, in view of the world's salvation, for a purity and holiness of life—highly superior, even though principally external, to the moral ideals of all the gentiles—which were required by the Law and for whose fulfillment not the Law, but the grace of the Christ to come (and now come) alone is efficacious. A people elect, and a people victim—they are bound up in their Law as though in God's trap—so long as they withhold faith in Him Whose death, wrought by their priesthood in the name of the Law, now brings them their deliverance. But this deliverance, which implies their salvation comes to all by the Cross, not by the Law, requires also that the Jews recognize that the regimen of the Law has come to an end, and that at the same time they renounce the keeping to themselves alone of the privileges which that regimen conferred to them.¹³

Maritain continued the tradition of denying non-Catholics a role in God's design and a mission in themselves in *The Peasant of the Garonne* (1966):

¹³Ibid., 70.

Here I am no longer considering Christians and non-Christians simply as men. I am considering them as members of Christ: explicitly and visibly members of Christ if they are Christians (living members if they have grace, “dead” members if they have lost it); members of Christ implicitly and invisibly if being non-Christians they have Christ’s grace; potentially and invisibly members of Christ if being non-Christians they do not have Christ’s grace. I don’t know if the vocabulary I have just used is perfectly exact: that’s a question for the author of *The Church of the Word Incarnate*. But what I do know is that in one guise or another and in one way or another, all men, at least potentially, are members of Christ, since he came into this world and suffered death for all of them and, since, barring a refusal on their part at the final instant of their life, he has saved all of them. And didn’t Christ himself say that whenever we give or do not give food or drink to any man whatever, as soon as he is in want, we are giving (or refusing to give) to Him? To Him because this poor man is a member, at least potentially of Christ’s body.¹⁴

Maritain stresses this concept:

What I mean (to speak in general and of the inner attitude of the average Christian) is that for a long time we loved non-Christians—truly and sincerely—although they were not Christians (it was this visible fact which took precedence). In other words, we loved non-Christians primarily inasmuch as having the misfortune not to be Christians, they were called to become so: we loved them primarily not as men or for what they were, but as Christians to be or for what they are called to become. We loved them primarily as people sitting in the shadow of death, toward whom our first duty of charity was to strive to convert them to the true faith. But now, by virtue of the great inner reversal I am stressing, we love non-Christians above all because they are, at least potentially, members of Christ (the invisible fact has now taken precedence): we love them primarily as human persons who are members, at least potentially, of this incarnate Truth whom they do not know and whom the errors professed by them deny. In short, we love them first of all in their own unfathomable mystery, for what they are, and as men in regard to whom the first duty of charity is simply love. And so, we love them first and foremost the way they are, and in seeking their own good, toward which, in actual

¹⁴Jacques Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne: An Old Layman Questions Himself About the Present Time* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), 71.

existence, they have to advance within a religious universe and a system of spiritual and cultural values where great errors may abound, but where truths worthy of respect and of love are likewise certainly present. Through these truths, it is possible for the One who made them, for the Truth who is Christ, to touch their hearts in secret, without themselves or anyone in the world being aware of it.¹⁵

Maritain has recognized the mission of Israel as being yeast in the world, but it is, however, a mission that has no supernatural dimension. At the same time he recommends the final conversion of Judaism. In his study on Saint Paul he will maintain, following the apostle's thought, that God does not repent of his promises to his chosen people. But the conversion of Israel will be the culmination of a process that Saint Thomas summed up in the third stage of his view of history.

To this Maritain adds that "The kingdom of the oral law is breaking down but is not yet abolished. It will be abolished on the day of the crucifixion when the veil of the temple is rent."¹⁶ This thought requires a reflective point of clarification in order to avoid the long-standing teaching of contempt that has denied Israel a place in God's design, and nurtured secular anti-Semitism.¹⁷

Exile and Return

The history of the Jewish people has known times of exile and return. The Egyptian slavery and God's redemption, the Babylonian exile and the return of Ezra and Nehemiah, the destruction of the Temple and the return to the inner temple of the Rabbinic commentary, the contribution of Spanish-Jewish thought, and the expulsion from Spain are some peak historical moments that transformed Jewish existence. But nothing perhaps can be compared with the Nazi persecution in the twentieth century. The Holocaust meant not only the destruction of part of European Judaism but also the end of an illusion. That illusion was the Jewish hope in the liberal promise of the French and industrial revolutions that emancipated the Jews from the medieval ghettos. It brought about "toleration" of Jews but not pluralistic acceptance.

¹⁵Ibid., 73.

¹⁶Jacques Maritain, *De la grace et de l'humanité de Jésus* (Paris: 1967), 140.

¹⁷Jules Isaac, *The Teaching of Contempt: Christian Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1965).

The illusion of a Jewish integration into the cultures and nations of Europe broke down in the concentration camps. Jews knew the potentials of evil, the reach of the diabolic tendency of the human being. The Holocaust has left us with a sense of loneliness in a hostile universe that wants, in many ways, to repeat the Nazi model using more ideological or sophisticated arguments, but all of them equally destructive.

Maritain understood as no other Catholic thinker the evil of Nazi totalitarianism and its diabolic ideology. In 1939 he denounced anti-Semitism in his *A Christian Looks at the Jewish Question*, an expanded text of a lecture he gave in Paris in 1938. The dates are significant: those were days of Nazi victories and the failure of many, especially among religious leadership, to denounce racism. Maritain cited Germany as well as other countries that were following racist measures, even though they were not under German domination (for example, the sad example of Poland with its restrictions on Jews that would prepare the atmosphere for the Final Solution).¹⁸ Maritain devotes attention to the meaning of anti-Semitism. He points out that

the diverse specific causes which the observer may assign to anti-Semitism, all the way from the feeling of hate for the foreigner natural to any social group down to religious hatred—alas! That these two words may be coupled—and to the manifold inconveniences produced by some ways of immigration, mask an underlying spring of hatred deeper down.

And he stresses the anti-religious basis of racial hatred in regard to the Jewish people,

If the world hates the Jews, it is because the world clearly senses that they will always be outsiders in a supernatural sense, it is because the world detests their passion for the absolute and the unbearable stimulus which it inflicts. It is the vocation of Israel which the world execrates. To be hated by the world is their glory, as it is also the glory of Christians who live by faith.

Maritain adds finally: “But Christians know that the Messiah has already conquered the world.”¹⁹

¹⁸Jacques Maritain, *A Christian Looks at the Jewish Question* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1939), 60–65.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 29–30.

Even a sympathetic Jewish reader is surprised by how close Maritain comes here to an expression of Christian triumphalism. He details "the present tragedy of the Jewish people," adding remarks that recall anti-Semitic expressions: "Everybody knows that the Jews miss no opportunity for lamentation. If they so well understand weeping, it is because they have a sempiternal habit of sorrowing and because they are disarmed." He recognizes, however, that "today, in any case, it may be said that, when it comes to persecutions, they are plentifully supplied."²⁰

This ambiguity echoes in his image of the Holocaust as a repetition of Calvary. Maritain wrote to the Seelisberg Colloquium in 1947 expressing his support for the European meeting's fight against anti-Semitism. He condemns racism but, once again, stresses his theological stand. Maritain writes that,

Behold, then, how without knowing it, Israel has been persecuted by the same hatred that also persecuted (and first) Jesus Christ. Her Messiah conformed her to himself in sorrow and abjection before conforming her to himself, some day, in light. Bloody first-fruits of Israel's plentitude in which Christians, if they look in their hearts, can decipher the advance signs in the following course of abominable events, whose memory will burn us always, and they already are taking their place in oblivion and indifference of the survivor. Like strange companions, Jews and Christians have travelled the way of Calvary together (I have already noted it many times since 1941). The great, mysterious fact is that the sufferings of Israel have taken on, more and more, the form of the cross.²¹

Maritain's description is painful and even offensive to the Jewish people, who will for centuries try to understand the "*mysterium tremendum*" of the Nazi organized murder. The Holocaust is a turning point in Jewish history and Jewish witness. It is also a stage of history that requires a Christian examination of soul for the killing of six million Jews and other groups that occurred in Western Europe, the center of Christianity. The Holocaust entails the obligation of dealing with human evil and the religious response to ideological totalitarianism that attempts, in one way or another, to destroy God itself.

²⁰Ibid., 43.

²¹Jacques Maritain, *Pour la justice, articles et discours (1940-1945)* (New York: Éditions de la Maison Française, 1945), 326.

Pope John Paul II has movingly manifested this in his June 1990 speech to those attending a meeting in Rome to prepare the 1991 Special Assembly of European Bishops. There, the pope said:

The war itself with its immense cruelty, a cruelty that reached its most brutal expression in the organized extermination of Jews, as well as of the Gypsies and of other categories of people, revealed to the European the other side of civilization that he was inclined to consider superior to all others. Certainly, the war also brought out people's readiness to show solidarity and make heroic sacrifices for a just cause. But these admirable aspects of the war experience seemed to be overwhelmed by the immensity of evil and destruction, not only on the material plane but also in the moral order. Perhaps in no other war in history has man been so thoroughly trampled upon in his dignity and fundamental rights. An echo of the humiliation and even desperation caused by such an experience could be heard in the question often repeated after the war: How can we go on living after Auschwitz? Sometimes another question presented itself: Is it possible to speak about God after Auschwitz?

Jews and Catholics might have different reasons for their joint reflection upon the meaning of Auschwitz. But there is something that unites both faith commitments: the fact that anti-Semitism "de-Christianizes Christians and leads them to paganism."²²

The State of Israel

Israel, the return to the Promised Land, is central in contemporary Jewish existence. There is, however, in Christian circles an attitude that denies this spiritual uniqueness of the return and the creation of the state. Yves Congar, for example, has said that the Jewish state "is a human historical phenomenon that has its own greatness but does not continue the spirituality of Exodus, or their return from Babylon."²³ These lines show a lack of knowledge and sensitivity for the Jewish heritage and for the centrality of God's promised land (Genesis 12).

Maritain was able to understand in an exceptional manner the question of God's Promised Land and Judaism. In the last section of *The Mystery of Israel* he says that he had intended to write a

²²Yves M. Congar, *Cristianos En Dialogo* (Madrid: 1967), 499.

²³Maritain, *Le Mystère D'Israël*, 225.

special chapter on the state of Israel. This chapter would have been documented and complemented with a visit, but due to his ill health he had to postpone the visit and the meditation that should have been the prelude to a "Theology of Israel." He points out in *The Mystery of Israel* that "We see paradoxically that the Israelis are disputed by the neighboring nations, the only territory to which, considering the panorama of human history, it is absolutely divinely certain that a people has unquestionable rights: because the people of Israel is the only people of the world to whom has been given a land, the land of Canaan, by the true God, the only transcendent God, creator of the universe and humanity. And what God has given once is given for ever."²⁴ Later, in his work *On the Church of Christ*, he added the following, "The state of Israel as a state is not a state like others. The return of part of the Jews to the Holy Land where the existence of the state is its sign and guarantee, is the fulfillment, according to our opinion of the divine promise, which does not admit of repentance." With this closing biblical echo, Maritain affirms that God knows what he's doing for all time when he gives.

In his analysis of the Middle East's complex problems, Maritain has shown a sense of balance. He avoided the passionate defenses as well as the unkind criticisms. It did not escape his notice that ideological groups from the left and the right have taken a so-called anti-Zionist position and have fallen into a refined form of anti-Semitism. For Maritain, "Those Christians who declare themselves to be anti-Zionist can say at the same time, in good faith, that they are not anti-Semites and they have shown that at the time of the Nazi occupation of France. They don't see that the consideration of anti-Zionism as a myth is the way by which anti-Semitism penetrates in an insidious way both the imagination and the heart of the people. The anti-Zionist propaganda, whose political origins are easy to discern, is in many ways anti-Semitic propaganda, well orchestrated." He stresses that "Anti-Israelism is no better than anti-Semitism."

Maritain influenced later Catholic thought especially the Holy See's 1988 document, *The Church and Racism*. That document responded to the obscene UN Resolution #3379 "Zionism is racism," stressing that,

²⁴Jacques Maritain, *On The Church of Christ* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973), 170.

Amongst the manifestations of systematic racial distrust, specific mention must once again be made of anti-Semitism. If anti-Semitism has been the most tragic form that racist ideology has assumed in our century, with the horrors of the Jewish “holocaust,” it has unfortunately not yet entirely disappeared. As if some had nothing to learn from the crimes of the past, certain organizations, with branches in many countries, keep alive the anti-Semite racist myth, with the support of networks of publications. Terrorist acts which have Jewish persons or symbols as their target have multiplied in recent years and show the radicalism of such groups. Anti-Zionism—which is not of the same order, since it questions the State of Israel and its policies—serves at times as a screen for anti-Semitism, feeding on it and leading to it. Furthermore, some countries impose undue harassments and restrictions on the free emigration of Jews.²⁵

A Final Reflection

As a Catholic thinker, Maritain was sincerely concerned about the human situation of the Jewish people in the days of Nazi and Communist totalitarianism. He denounced and condemned anti-Semitism at times of ecclesiastical silence or indifference to the Jewish situation. Yet ironically his understanding of Judaism and the God-Israel covenant was negative and he did not recognize the ongoing meaning and validity of the Jewish commitment. He accepted the Jewish citizens and their social rights. He denied the Jewish person, the covenantal partner of God. This duality requires all who are members of the contemporary joint Christian-Jewish reflection to make efforts to fathom the full meaning of God’s call to all of us.

²⁵Eugene J. Fisher and Leon Klenicki, *Anti-Semitism Is a Sin*. A discussion of the document “The Church and Racism: Towards a More Fraternal Society,” Holy See Commission for Justice and Peace, 7 November 1988 (New York: Anti-Defamation League, 1990), 23.